Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of online and in-person ESL/EFL classes

By Kanae Bessho & Brian Strong, Canada

Introduction

With the rise of digital communication and remote learning, online classes for English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) have become more popular for accessibility and flexibility. Since 2016, the online English learning market has tripled in size, with an estimate of 17.87% growth between 2023 and 2028 (Technavio, n.d.). The COVID-19 pandemic impacting in-person education has certainly pushed the implementation of online learning worldwide, including ESL/EFL classes. As a result, demand for online English instructors has increased.

Over the past three years, I have been an online EFL instructor myself, and I have seen this trend in an increasing number of online ESL/EFL learning platforms over the years. Initially, there were only a few notable platforms, whereas now, they are abundant. Online classes offer flexibility, allowing busy students to fit lessons into their schedules with less commitment compared to in-person classes with rigid schedules (Lo, 2023).

However, many students still prefer in-person learning for several reasons. One reason is that in-person classes are often conducted in a group, offering more peer interactions, whereas such interactions may be limited in online classes with individual students (Lo, 2023). Ellis (2012) argues that not only do social interactions promote language acquisition within learners who participate, and other scholars argue that they also contribute to self-regulated learning, which in turn results in academic success (Bai & Wang, 2023). It is also suggested that that peer-to-peer interactions promote the learning of students resulting in higher test scores (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Therefore, in-person classes conducted with a group of students may be better at promoting the learning of the students than online classes which often involve one instructor and one student.

Another reason may be that in-person classes often have a structured schedule for classes and offer a large amount of learning resources and materials, providing an appropriate environment to facilitate the learning of the students (Hashim & Yunus, 2018). Because many in-person classes are run regularly, it helps create

learning routines for the students, which helps students become used to using English as part of their everyday lives. Having such routines can help students feel more confident in acquiring and using English, thereby promoting their learning (Hashim & Yunus, 2018).

Finally, because online classes are mediated by technology, both students and teachers may shy away from them if they are not tech-savvy. Some students, especially those in the older generations, may have trouble with online learning because of their internet literacy levels, and they may feel more comfortable with in-person learning. Furthermore, online classes often come with technological limitations, hindering class conduct. Some teachers report that online classes can be quite disruptive when there is an issue with the technology, causing the computer to freeze, or the internet to disconnect (Lo, 2023).

While online ESL/EFL classes are in increasing demand, in-person ESL/EFL classes still hold value. To address the different needs and profiles of ESL/EFL learners, instructors should be able to accommodate different class delivery methods. With my experience, I feel more comfortable teaching online, but I believe that being an ESL/EFL teacher today unfolds much more than being able to teach online. I am currently in a program to become certified in teaching ESL with a practicum component. For the practicum component, I am asked to observe and teach local in-person ESL classes as a student teacher. While there are many similarities between online classes and in-person classes, I also have noticed some notable differences between online and in-person classes during my practicum placement.

In the discussion below, based on my experience as an online EFL instructor and a student teacher in an in-person ESL class, I will discuss some of the primary differences that I have noticed between online and in-person classes from three different aspects: class size, lesson material, and assessment. Then, I will discuss how these differences could affect pedagogy, teaching effectiveness, and student learning outcomes along with personal real-life examples. Finally, a conclusion will be offered to discuss some of the implications of these differences, emphasizing the need for adaptable teaching approaches that cater to diverse learner needs.

Discussion

Although some differences between online classes and in-person classes were mentioned already, the implications of the class features depending on the methods of delivery were not discussed. Below, I will provide other differences that I noticed based on my experience as an online EFL instructor and a student teacher in an in-person ESL class and discuss how such differences could have an impact on teaching and learning.

Class size

First, the primary difference between an online class and an in-person class that I noticed is the size of the class. I have only taught one student at a time on the online platform, but at my practicum placement, the number of students can vary from 20 to 30 depending on the day. This is important to consider because the bigger the class size is, the more diverse students are, and this may lead to varied learning outcomes for different students (Xiao & Hu, 2019). Because each student brings their own unique learner profile to the class, there will be many individual differences in a large classroom. These differences can have an impact on effective pedagogy and the overall quality of instruction as they are often linked to successful language learning outcomes (Dornyei, 2005). Therefore, as a language instructor, it would be ideal to create a lesson that addresses the individual differences of the students to better assist their learning.

Many aspects of individual differences are positively correlated to higher language proficiency (Dornyei, 2005; Lightbown & Spada, 2021). Some of the individual differences that contribute to better learning outcomes are language learning aptitude, motivation and interests, personality, and learning style (Dornyei, 2015; Griffiths & Soruç, 2021; Lightbown & Spada, 2021). On top of these individual differences, instructors should also be aware of students' varying proficiency levels. In group language classes, there are often students with varying proficiency levels in different areas of skills (i.e., reading, listening, writing, and speaking). Therefore, it would be important to consider the differences in language levels along with other individual differences among students when creating an effective lesson plan.

In a group lesson, where there are different levels of motivation, aptitude, personality traits, and proficiency among students, it can be difficult to find a middle ground of what teaching approach works best to accommodate everyone. Because I am used to teaching individual EFL lessons online, I was able to create a lesson plan that addressed everyone's needs and characteristics. For example, if the student's motivation to learn the language were to travel abroad and use the local language, the focus of the lesson would be on the skills needed when traveling such as knowing how to interact with clerks when shopping or asking for directions. In individual lessons, I would be also mindful of the types of material presented to the students depending on their learning style, although the research related to learning styles remains inconclusive on this matter (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). If the student is a visual learner, I may present more images and graphs to aid their learning, and if they are an auditory learner, I may introduce more dialogues or speeches in audio clips.

However, when it comes to group language lessons, an instructor should employ a teaching approach that addresses the diversity that exists within a class. To ensure the effective learning of the students in a group

setting as opposed to individual ESL lessons, there are some strategies that can be employed to address individual differences of the students. This is important for me to consider as I am new to group ESL classes as an instructor, and I believe that using appropriate strategies for group classes would help students learn better.

In a group lesson, many students come to class with different intentions and interests. Some students may take a course to find employment, or to pursue higher education. Students often have different reasons to learn English and they may also have varying levels of motivation. Because there is a strong correlation between motivation and language acquisition (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017), the classes should be designed to promote the motivation of the students.

One way to promote the motivation of students as an instructor is by building teacher-student rapport (Meng, 2021). Instructors can build rapport by allowing free expression, giving appropriate feedback, using humor, and being delicate and enthusiastic, which would result in the enhancement of students' motivation and engagement (Meng, 2021). Furthermore, instructors can also try to increase the motivation of the students by fulfilling some of the needs in the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Meng, 2021) argues that when the three needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) of the SDT are fulfilled, it leads to the motivation of the students. Instructors can try to promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs by creating a supportive and safe environment for the students and encouraging students' autonomy and agency over their learning (Meng, 2021). For example, to fulfill students' relatedness needs, instructors may try to have as many teacher-student interactions as possible with respect and empathy (Aiusheeva, 2019). To fulfill autonomy needs, instructors may give students the option to choose the class content (Aiusheeva, 2019) rather than prescribing predetermined topics and material.

In my practicum placement, these factors of motivation are reflected in my host teacher's classes. I see that she builds teacher-student rapport effectively by using appropriate feedback, incorporating humor into the lesson, and allowing students to make comments and/or questions freely. There are many teacher-learner interactions, showing students empathy and respect, accounting for the relatedness needs of the SDT (Aiusheeva, 2019). Moreover, she conducts needs analysis and distributes a questionnaire of student interests to reflect in her classes. This way, the students feel that their learning is rather self-directed, and that their purpose in learning English and their interests are reflected in the classes. According to the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2008), fulfilling autonomy needs this way helps students be more motivated and engaged (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Lesson Material

Another difference between online classes and in-person classes is the learning materials students interact with. After several hours of observation at my practicum placement, I have realized that not only the format

of teaching materials were different (i.e., digital vs. physical), but also there seems to be more materials at students' disposal in in-person classes. For example, there are many educational/informational posters in the classroom at my practicum school that students can use as their language resources. I think that having a physical classroom with rich language resources accounts for the exposure to more language input that online students may not otherwise be exposed to, and having such language input can promote student learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). Therefore, students in in-person classes may have more benefits.

In terms of the medium of materials, it is difficult to say which is better than the other because there seems to be a lack of research articles comparing the use of digital and physical materials in the context of ESL education. However, in physical classrooms, instructors can use real-life materials and that may improve the learning of the students (Brown & Lee, 2015). The use of realia, or real-life objects can help students connect language to the real world, and is said to be effective, particularly for beginner learners (Brown & Lee, 2015). My practicum host teacher often uses realia in her lessons, and it seems to be effective in filling the gap in students' language knowledge.

On top of the differences in the medium of learning materials, there are also differences in the content of the material. When I was teaching online, I noticed that there was a lack of material with authentic and meaningful use of language on the online teaching platform. Scholars argue that using authentic material for language teaching is important (Brown & Lee, 2015; Rogers & Medley, 1988) as it allows for the input of the real use of language in a meaningful way and allows students to learn the functional use of language. Authentic materials include videotaped materials audiotaped materials and print media materials (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Most of the learning material I have used did not include authentic use of language and there was a lot of emphasis on the form of the language. My students did not have many opportunities to be exposed to authentic and meaningful language use, and that may not have been as beneficial to them. In my practicum placement, I noticed that there is a lot of authentic use of the language, especially for reading materials. Students are often asked to read materials such as brochures to be exposed to the real use of everyday languages. Such use of authentic materials should help students learn functional and meaningful use of the language (Rogers & Medley, 1988).

Assessment

Finally, the last difference I have noticed is the presence of assessment components. At my practicum placement, the students are given weekly tests, whereas, on the online teaching platform, students were never given a test. This is important to note because language assessment such as an achievement test can have an impact on language acquisition through washbacks whether positive or negative (Brown & Lee, 2015). Washbacks are described as the influence of testing on teaching and learning. They can manifest

in changes in students' motivation, autonomy, self-confidence, identity, and investment (Brown & Lee, 2015; Cheng & Fox, 2017). Not only that, having a test in class can also inform the instructor of the levels of understanding the students have attained, and such information can be used to improve teaching and learning in the language course (Li et al., 2012).

As an instructor, the intention when administering an assessment, such as a test, should be to support positive washback to increase meaningful learning (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Ideally, tests would increase students' motivation and increase their language proficiency as a result of having an assessment component. Although instructors can still engage in informal assessment by observing students' performance and keeping track of their learning (Li et al., 2012) instead of administering a formal assessment (i.e., tests), because informal assessment does not contribute to formal grades, students may not feel as motivated to perform well. This seemed to be a problem when I was teaching online because students did not have the motivation or pressure to perform well or improve. They were also not able to track their improvement or progress without any testing. Because tests can allow students to reflect on their learning and search for ways to improve (Li et al., 2012), without any tests, I felt that my online students were not given this opportunity to reflect on their progress.

Although instructors can certainly provide feedback based on informal assessment during a class so that students can reflect on their learning, formal assessment may provide better quality feedback (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Formal assessment such as a formative assessment can help instructors better understand the characteristics of the students, their progress, and how to support their learning, and gathering such information is crucial in creating effective feedback (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Therefore, having no formal assessment in the online course that I taught may not have been as effective for their learning as I, as an instructor, was not able to gather enough information about the students, and the students were not able to receive quality feedback to improve their learning.

At my practicum placement, not only are the students asked to do weekly tests, but also, they are asked to do a portfolio assessment, in which students organize documents used in the classroom to indicate their learning process and learning product (Li et al., 2012). I think that having such components within a language course makes it more effective for students' language learning because students are able to receive feedback from an instructor on a test, and they are also able to evaluate and keep track of their learning on a portfolio. It seems that students are given many opportunities to receive feedback at my practicum placement through assessments and oral feedback in class whether explicit or implicit, and having such feedback can influence students' motivation as well (Cheng & Fox, 2017). If students can receive quality feedback, students would have higher levels of motivation, and that, in turn, should result in students with

improved language skills (Cheng & Fox, 2017).

Conclusion

Above, I have highlighted the three major differences between the online EFL classes I have taught and the in-person ESL classes I am currently observing at my practicum placement to obtain a teaching certificate in ESL. More specifically, I have emphasized how class size, lesson materials, and assessment practices can shape the learning experience of the students depending on how the classes are run.

As the demand for online ESL/EFL classes increases, it is important that instructors understand the strengths and weaknesses of different class delivery methods and be able to accommodate a variety of learner profiles to create a more effective learning environment. While online classes offer a great deal of flexibility and accessibility for busy individuals, it comes with some disadvantages. Online students often have limited social interactions and resources, and they may not have as many opportunities to receive feedback. On the other hand, although in-person classes may lack the flexibility that online classes offer, they can facilitate peer interactions and rich learning resources essential for learning and structured assessment that can contribute to students' motivation and success.

Although there is an increasing demand for online ESL/EFL classes, there is still a lack of research comparing the effectiveness of different teaching approaches between online and in-person classes. This gap in the literature can hinder the understanding of how appropriate different teaching approaches are depending on the context. To provide a better learning experience for ESL/EFL students, the distinctions between online and in-person classes in ESL/EFL should be investigated and addressed in future research.

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Author Bios

Kanae Bessho is an undergraduate student specializing in applied linguistics and currently pursuing a certificate in teaching ESL. Drawing from her own experiences as an ESL learner, Kanae strives to implement effective teaching methodologies by bridging the gap between research and practice. Her research interests lie in language assessment, with a particular focus on examining rater effects in ESL writing assessments, aiming to enhance the fairness and validity in language testing.

Dr. Brian Strong is an Assistant Professor at Carleton University, specializing in second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition and multiword expressions. His research explores the effects of trial-and-error learning and phrasal verb usage using corpus and experimental methods. As a co-editor of *The Language Teacher*, Dr. Strong supports research dissemination and pedagogical advancement.